

Network of European Regions Using Space Technologies

Space technology holds numerous applications for citizens and non-related institutions in Europe. NEREUS President **Alain Bénétiau** wants space opportunities to be increasingly exploited and outlines how the Network's activities can facilitate dialogue with policy makers and communication between regional users and providers



Could you explain the main function of the Network of European Regions Using Space Technologies (NEREUS) and how it serves its members?

NEREUS is an initiative which currently includes 26 regions and 33 Associate Members with the common objective to spread the use and understanding of space technologies across Europe for the benefit of regions and their citizens. As the voice of European regions, the network not only serves as an advocate for the regions on matters of space applications, but also as a direct channel to the regional users of space technologies. It is the key interface between the regional and national levels as well as European institutions.

What strategies are you employing to spread the use and understanding of space technologies throughout Europe?

During its General Assembly in December 2010, our network community agreed on a common strategy to take the NEREUS objectives forward over the subsequent years. By presenting space services in a regional and societal context we strive to raise awareness and support training and education for the added value of space services for regions, their citizens and companies. Our working groups produced two publications that illustrate a number of GMES and GNSS uses at regional level which refer thematically to public policies and territorial management tasks. Through the interregional cooperation and interaction on our platform, as well as related projects such as the Seventh Framework Programme Coordinated Action DORIS_NET (see p60), we have established structures that involve a broad range of players across Europe. European coverage is an important feature of our initiative. We do not exclusively address those regions with a space market or strong space industry but we wish to invite all European regions to exploit the potential of space applications.

In what capacity does NEREUS act as the voice for regional European Space Policy?

NEREUS is a network of regions which share its governance. All full members are mandated by their region, often as part of the regional transport, economy or research ministry with a direct link to the regional government. Organised as an a.i.s.b.l. under Belgian law, the network is financially independent and solely financed by its yearly membership fees to secure its independence as the voice of European regions. Jointly with our three vice-presidents Christian Bruns (Bremen), Alberto Cavalli (Lombardy Region) and Professor Alan Wells (East Midlands), I represent the network at political level, while our Secretary General Ms Roya Ayazi heads the permanent secretariat in Brussels and is – together with her team – the key interface of the network at EU level. NEREUS introduced the regional level in the policy making process for the first time. Contrary to the past, when only national and European institutions determined space policies, regions now have their own common platform. Whilst the national position is always a mixture/compromise of different interests, NEREUS is focused solely on regional concerns. The network not only provides its regions with a joint forum for defining their positions, developing strategies and speaking with one voice towards policy makers, but is also a reference point for the political dialogue with European and national institutions in order to underline the regional dimension of European space policies and programmes.

Do you think that current policies are sufficiently tailored to end-user needs?

A future EU space programme should develop and promote space services at regional level whilst acknowledging end-user needs. With the two flagship projects of the Union – EGNOS and Galileo – as well as GMES, the Union gets systems that provide the public with a wide range of services. Thus, for the first time, regions and their citizens become a 'client' or a target group of European space activities. As regions are a major market and key end-user of space services, they need to be involved in the development of relevant policies and programmes and need to have an arena to express their needs.

By what means are you lobbying for an increased use of space-based services by regional and local authorities?

Our objective is to stimulate a reflection of how space themes could be increasingly included in regional strategies and programmes but also exploited as a problem solver at regional level. Our GMES and GNSS publications in a non-scientific language and our high-level workshop that presented space as an enabler to advance a regional strategy are just two examples of our awareness-raising activities. The idea of the workshop was to demonstrate with illustrative examples and best practices how space services provide solutions for the EU's Danube Strategy, comprising environment, transport and shipment topics.

In what way can you improve the construction and development of space technology markets?

Given that the emergence of new services is pivotal for the optimal development of the space market, we can help by identifying and linking different end-user groups and enhancing the dialogue among them and service providers. In contrast to service providers it is very difficult to mobilise end-users. Through our member regions, we have access to a considerable number of public and commercial user communities, and we might therefore be able to encourage their involvement. At the level of users for public purposes, a lot of actors are not aware of the opportunities they might have. Moreover, at the level of commercial uses, the knowledge base is still underdeveloped. Considering cross-sectoral uses in a number of industry sectors – including automobile, IT and health – the real potential of space lays in its linkage with non-space sectors. Here we need to pave the way to establish synergies across industry sectors and across different economic and professional communities, and enhance the exchange among them.

How will NEREUS explore new paths for funding?

GMES and GNSS are moving increasingly into the operational phase resulting in applications and services closer to the market. For this reason, NEREUS is advocating the pursuit of a new path for funding by creating real synergies between the structural funds and other thematic financial instruments. We will only achieve the critical mass needed to allow the European space market to grow if we see space as a cross-cutting enabling technology for advancing the Europe 2020 vision and its seven flagship projects. As a network of regions, regional development and territorial cohesion across Europe play a particular important role to us. The relationship between space and territorial policies is fundamental to our community and in our view an essential prerequisite for an ambitious European space policy. Thus we wish to further explore how regional policies – especially structural funds and related funding instruments – could be exploited for supporting space activities and developing the space market in Europe.

Many services developed in the framework of the GMES programme address policies of great interest for the regions, such as country planning and natural hazards prevention. What would be the consequence for the regions if, as proposed by the EC, the EU abandons the financing of the GMES programme?

The consequences will be twofold: on the one hand, it will mean a discontinuation of the services in the short or medium term. By securing the sustainability of an information infrastructure necessary to produce output information in the form of maps, datasets, reports, targeted alerts, etc., GMES helps people and organisations to take action, make appropriate policy decisions and decide on necessary investments. A discontinuation of the programme simply means decreasing the efficiency of public policies and the uptake of space services for public purposes. In particular, I would like to draw attention to the issue of emergency response. A discontinuation of the programme would mean that the prevention of risks relating to natural disasters (including forest fires and floods) would be made more difficult owing to the lack of precise risk mapping services, and that the response to natural disasters could be less efficient.

On the other hand, in more direct economical and social terms, I would like to recall that GMES represents a great potential for businesses

in the services market, who will be able to make use of the data and information it provides according a full and open access principle. Earth Observation-based services already exist in Europe, but they are dispersed and fragile as they cannot rely on a sustainable observation capacity. With the exception of meteorological services, long-term availability and reliability of information is not guaranteed. Without GMES, potential providers of the operational services might leave the market due to the absence of prospective EU financing. Service providers would probably still continue seeking research co-financing and therefore co-investing in GMES for a short time, but without a clear perspective concerning operational activities, the risk exists that smaller providers in particular would not survive. This will lead to the loss of invaluable know-how in Europe and of important opportunities for the creation of jobs, in particular in SMEs. The question is whether we are ready to take this risk.

Given the budget proposal of the European Commission, do you think that regions will be able and willing to mobilise the critical mass to support GMES activities independently from the national and EU level?

Due to the economic crisis the situation in regions is increasingly difficult and restrictive to new initiatives. Given reduced budgets, regions have to spend public money much more carefully and tend to avoid risks. As a result, public authorities tend to be less favourable to funding the implementation and use of innovative technologies, even if they come along with visible benefits. Therefore it would be likely that most regions would refrain from investing in GMES-related programmes on their own, preferring to focus on activities which complement large EU and national programmes.

In the case of GMES, substantial investments have been made over the past 10 years to get GMES into the operational phase. Having achieved this, it is now the time to develop and implement services for a wide range of public and private applications. The uncertain funding situation for GMES post-2014 is very likely to impact the motivation to develop and implement space services for public purposes, especially among public users such as regional and local authorities. Despite the obvious benefits, the introduction of new technologies is always confronted with reservations. Regions have to make special efforts and spend considerable resources to initiate new technology processes. In order to convince regional and local authorities to use satellite/geo-information data or change their procedures, you need to demonstrate the added value with factual data (eg. savings or

the extent to which the new technology is more precise) and give users a long-term perspective regarding the availability and compatibility of GMES services and products. If we do not have an ambitious European programme that points the way for commitments to invest in GMES, we will lose the trust in these technologies at regional level.

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